

Major League Soccer Panel Discussion

Wednesday, February 22, 2023

Commissioner Don Garber

Panel Discussion



MAURICE EDU: Good morning, everybody. Before we get started, look around this place. What do you think? What are your initial thoughts?

DON GARBER: You know, I think it's rare to be a part of history, and I just want to let everybody who's been part of this project know from me that when you have an idea and that idea starts with a dream and that dream turns into what we're seeing here, it's a life experience that I think I'll never forget.

When we envisioned putting this all together, when I walked in here, and I don't think I ever would have imagined that it looks like this. It kind of makes sense when you think about who our partner is, where design meets functionality meets beauty and meets the idea of this unique environment. It had my mouth open when I walked in.

I think it's going to be an unbelievable day, I think, with all the sessions that we're going to see around and the way this room can evolve for what we're going to do today, which is pretty similar to how it's going to evolve and how we're going to do our shows.

Real great shout-out to our partners at Apple, to our partners at NEP and IMG who worked tirelessly over the last number of months, to my team led by Gary Stevenson and Seth Bacon and the rest of the group that probably hasn't had a day off for -- they've had a lot of sleepless nights for the last number of months. My heart really goes out with gratitude, so it's really very special.

MAURICE EDU: This place is absolutely incredible. This is the new home of MLS Season Pass, and as we get ready to kick off the 28th season of MLS, talk about the progress. I look back to when I came into the league in 2007, 13 clubs, six stadiums, and here we are getting ready to kick off on Saturday with 29 teams, and it's just an amazing amount of progress that's happened so far and even more to come.

With that being said, let's get started. Talking about the

28th season now, a new team coming in, obviously a groundbreaking partnership with Apple, and of course the introduction of Leagues Cup this summer. How are you feeling coming into this weekend?

DON GARBER: I always feel good. I'm an optimist, a "possiblist." I always believe in what can be.

It's interesting, going into season 25 for me and the evolution of the league over all these years really over a generation has been awe inspiring. Think of where it started not that long ago. You and I were in Qatar together and seeing you do your thing and the success of our national team leading into the launch of our 29th club. You're going to hear from Carolyn Kindle shortly, what that team represents in the community, and I know we're going to talk about that again.

Leagues Cup speaks to the innovation of our league. We are the only league in the world that's ever going to have interleague play, just two leagues across the border playing in a competition that I think speaks to the fact that we will take risks, we'll have big ideas, and then, as we always do, we'll execute on them.

A look at what's going to go on this weekend beyond the launch of this great new partnership with Apple. Chris Klein, someone that you've played with back in the day, I hear got over 70,000 seats sold for the opener in the Rose Bowl, and again, think of MLS, you have two beautiful stadiums. We're going to play so we could set a record for Major League Soccer in the Rose Bowl. 70,000 in Atlanta, we'll have 70,000 a week later in Charlotte. We'll have packed stadiums. It'll be a great launch for think of the next generation of Major League Soccer. I couldn't be more excited about the year ahead.

MAURICE EDU: You brought up St. Louis. We know there's a deep history of soccer within that city, but let's be real; did you really think that 60,000 deposits received, 63,000 deposits for season tickets would be sold? How did we get to that point, and how is that a reality?

DON GARBER: You know, whereas it starts with -- I don't



know if I've ever told my folks this story. I raised my family in New Jersey, and my hometown, a guy named Yogi Berra lived, and you'd walk around town and you'd see Yogi, and you'd go into the local coffee shop, and Yogi Berra would be walking around, and he was an old guy even back then.

I remember walking up to him after I'd started my discussions in St. Louis, and you meet with the governor and you meet with the mayor, it was before I met the Taylor family, but St. Louis is one of the great hotbeds of soccer in America. It is an historic place.

I walked up to Yogi after coming back and said, I was just in your town, and everybody was telling me this is the birthplace of soccer in America, and I don't really understand what's going on. He said, I was a better soccer player than a baseball player. I grew up over the hill, sort of the core of the 1950 U.S. World Cup team that beat England in Uruguay many, many years ago. Soccer was born in that community, and we just never were able to get the things that make professional sports work.

It starts with a great ownership group. Carolyn and her family, it's the only majority owner, female-owned team in Major League Soccer. They're embedded in the community. They believe in the city. They believe in what they city was, what it is today, and what that city could be, and now we have Major League Soccer as the core of the rebirth of the downtown, the revitalization of the city of St. Louis. Community-based, the stadium is spectacular. It's the only facility that we have that's connected to the training ground and their offices. It's remarkable. Can't wait for their home game. I'll be there a week after our opening game. It's going to be spectacular.

Carolyn is an inspiring, really fun person. I think everybody is going to be really interested to hear what she has to say. Thanks to you and your family, Carolyn. It's going to be really cool.

MAURICE EDU: Very much so. Thank you. I can't wait to get out and see that stadium. Taylor has been my source of information. Since we're on the topic of expansion, there have been talks with San Diego, a little bit of talk about Las Vegas. Do you have any updates on what's happening with the 30th team and even beyond that? Will 30 be the cap? Are we looking to go to 32? What's that looking like?

DON GARBER: You know, I can remember back in the day, you had 12 teams, and we'd say, are we ever going to get to 14, and then you do the work and you'd bring in great partners and you'd build great stadiums and you'd get community involved, and here we are with team 29, and frankly I don't think any of us in the soccer community

or in the United States or really around the world would imagine that we'd be the largest soccer league in the world today.

Growth has been a big part of sort of the engine that's driven opportunity and what this sport can be and what it will be for generations to come. We're a big country, and we've got three teams in Canada.

I remember when you were playing in the league where you said, I'd sit down with Thierry Henry, and he would say to me, and this was before we were chartering our players, he would say, when I played for Arsenal, I would take a bus to a game and I'd be home for dinner, and now I've got to go to Vancouver. I don't understand what's happening here.

So that's the North American pro sports model. We have teams across three time zones, multiple climate zones. We do need more teams. The 30th team will come at some point soon. Hopefully for media people we'd like to get that announced by the end of the year.

Never thought we'd be at 28. Never thought we'd be at 29. We'd say we're going to stop at 30, but the other major leagues are larger than that. I don't sort of ever say never in Major League Soccer. There are many other markets that are opportunities for us. I think San Diego and Las Vegas are the most likely opportunities for 30. But we don't have a team in Phoenix; we don't have a team in Sacramento; we don't have a team in Detroit. All big markets in our country. You never know, Tampa is another big city. Soccer is exploding professionally everywhere, on the professional side and the men's and women's side, so we'll see.

MAURICE EDU: You know I'm going to be hounding you because I want to know what's happening with that. Apple, obviously a huge, huge partner coming in to playing a big role this season. Talk about how they're going to help to really grow this league from a global standpoint and what their input is going to be like for this league.

DON GARBER: It starts with the reconfiguration of how we are presenting our league to our fans. Started fan first. How do we create a schedule that works for them as opposed to what works for a media partner? How do we create a time slot that works for our teams? Would you like to play games on Saturday night and Wednesday? How do we have the opportunity to speak in the global narrative because we are a global sport. We're not as much yet of a global league. How do you put the foundation in place to create a future that is bigger, broader, more popular than we are today and the configuration of what our media landscape would look like? Started with a plan, and then



fortunately we were able to meet Jim and the folks at -- Tim Cook and Eddy Cue at Apple, and it was an alignment of interest and opportunity.

How unbelievable it is for us to be able to partner with the leading company in the world that thinks about the fan, the consumer first. It's not thinking about how does my device work for them. It's how does somebody want to interact with my device, and now their content that frankly they're great leaders in.

It's been an incredible journey to get to where we are with Apple. Think about what we have here, the fact that we're going to be producing our games and putting them on a device for any fan, anywhere in the world, anytime, anywhere without any blackouts. It's unprecedented, and no other league really can offer that type of opportunity for a consumer or fan engagement.

I couldn't be more excited, and looking forward to what you have later today. This has been a great, great partnership to start, and the future is going to be very bright.

And by the way, 80 broadcasters and more people like you that have come off the field and now have a great opportunity to be able to extend your love and passion for our league and the sport in front of the cameras. I'm so excited about the opportunity that it's going to represent for so many people in the ecosystem of soccer in America.

MAURICE EDU: I was just going to say that I'm obviously playing a role in that, as well, so incredibly excited to be a part of that partnership, and the future truly is incredibly bright.

DEI. Diversity, equity and inclusion, the league just announced the MLS Advance, which is an initiative focused on increasing inclusion and representation for underrepresented candidates for sporting positions across MLS's ecosystem and beyond. Talk a little bit about that, and how do you feel the league has progressed in terms of DEI?

DON GARBER: You know what, I'm going to start with, we have an ethos, sort of the DNA of Major League Soccer is to be a league for a new America.

When I came in in 1999, what motivated me to sort of take on this challenge of growing a professional soccer league in North America was this idea that our country was changing, that the demographics in our nation were shifting, that young people were growing up with the game and that were part of a digital global community, and what makes our league so special is the fact that we could play the game at any age, doesn't matter what your economic

background is, doesn't matter about your race and ethnicity, and we wanted to have that not just translated in terms of who our fans are, because it's an incredibly diverse fan base, perhaps the youngest and most diverse fan base in pro sports, but we wanted that to be reflected in our offices. We wanted that to be reflected on our field. We wanted that to be reflected in front of and behind the camera.

That's a deep commitment. It starts with ownership. It's then pushed throughout our entire organization. Diversity, equity and inclusion is not a department; it's really part of who we are and what we care about and what makes us proud to be leading a professional sport.

Our folks, and you know Sola Winley well, is in his second year. We're proud of our diversity-in-hiring policy. We're proud of MLS Advance, which is not just about making opportunities available for coaches of color and women coaches and coaches that are Latino, technical people, as well, but nurturing and building the opportunity, and that takes work. That's what MLS Advance is about and was announced the other day.

I think we'll be leading the world of sport, and I think that's the thing that's going to make everybody, whether it's media who cover us, people would work with us, who would work for us, our partners proud to be associated with Major League Soccer.

MAURICE EDU: Let's transition a little bit. Let's talk about the summer. We talked in the beginning about some new additions coming into the league. One of those new additions is the Leagues Cup this summer. Obviously Liga MX, MLS, they're going to halt their seasons, play in a World Cup style tournament. Just talk a little bit about how did this come together and what type of impact you see this having for MLS and even for Liga MX.

DON GARBER: Well, again, when we think about it, it's not something that you put on your office door. Innovation isn't something, hey, we've got to be innovative. It's got to be part of it. You've got to think about an innovative new media partnership with Apple. You've got to think about innovating in terms of producing our own broadcasts. But the game itself is really what it's about.

We're people that are presenting the front porch of the sport, but at the end of the day, it's about games that are played, and how do you create the most unique and competitive format. Having a media deal that allows us to create a format that works for our fans and works for what we're trying to achieve, it starts with that, but we've got one of the most popular professional soccer leagues in the world right across our border. So why not sit down and



create a competition that will matter.

This started back in 2005. Early, early, we played Super League and we played interleague. You might remember some of this stuff. We have our Campeones Cup, our two leagues playing in a final together with each other.

But we wanted it to be authentic. We want to have Club America come to LA or Santos go to Cincinnati or St. Louis and play a game where everything is on the line. Players get paid more money for wins. The winners of the tournament get spots into the Champions League. The Champions League will feed into the new FIFA Club World Cup. It's going to be really, really awesome. I'm very excited about what we've been able to achieve.

We've got a great way of presenting it with our media partners. It's going to be pretty cool. World Cup every year in Major League Soccer.

MAURICE EDU: I know players will always be happy to hear that they're going to be paid more money, so bring that on.

Let's talk a little bit about player development within MLS. I know as I said we have a panel coming, but I want to hear some of your thoughts, first starting off with MLS Next. How have you seen the progression of that going, and give me your thoughts on what that's shown so far in terms of developing our players within this academy system.

DON GARBER: You know, America is a sleeping giant in terms of our influence in the global soccer/football market. I think for many, many years, the rest of the football world looks at us in terms of how we're structured and how we do things like DEI, how we produce our game, all the things that I would say are the business of sport.

But what is happening over the last number of years is some of the best young players in the world are coming out of our development system, and that was happening naturally. Now how do you organize that in a way where there's verticality to the pyramid so that we can develop players in a professional environment with MLS Next, push them up, and you'll hear about this, through our second level, MLS Next Pro, which again, couldn't be more excited about, and the folks that talk about it, innovation on the field and innovation off the field, but creating ascension. So there were 29 players that played in MLS Next Pro that signed first-team contracts, and we didn't have to go outside of the ecosystem to do that. We can do that within our own pyramid because we are unique in terms of the soccer pyramid in America.

I think you're going to see in the next two to three to five to

ten years just a horde of players that are going to be developed in academies going through the system, signing first-team contracts, and maybe they stay forever in Major League Soccer and maybe they go overseas and play. But it's going to work well.

MAURICE EDU: I think another part that's beautiful about this partnership with Apple is those games are all going to be broadcast and seen and available for those who are subscribing to MLS Season Pass. They can see that from a global standpoint, as well. We saw some reports that MLS was actively pushing to conduct a temporary concussion subtrial. Obviously the rulemakers globally voted against that initiative. Where does that currently stand?

DON GARBER: Yeah, I'm glad you asked that question. With the health and safety of our players, when you're running a league, it's your biggest priority. We work deeply in terms of ensuring that our players are trained properly, and the environments, as you know, compared to where we were in the early days compared to where we are now, our training grounds (indiscernible) players is best in class, so remember, back when (indiscernible) in Miami complex, their training facilities, soon-to-be a brand new stadium in a couple of years downtown, he said this was as good as anything he's played in, when he played in the Premier League, when he played in Italy or he played in France, and we've got 29 of them.

So when you think about the commitment to infrastructure, you've got to be thinking about what happens on the soft side of that. Concussions are something that all professional sports and youth sports manage through. We believe the test of a concussion substitute rule is just smart.

By the way, testing things is smart. Why would anybody not want to test something and see if it works. If it doesn't work, you don't do it. But we constantly are trying to innovate with things on the field. We're an advocate for the temporary concussion substitute rule. I've gotten voted against it, but I'm optimistic.

I get it; the global game has got to have the same rules, and it's not as easy for us just to pass those rules on our own. We've offered to do it. We'll be the first league to say we'll do it, like we tested bar. The first league to do that, and now that's obviously embraced throughout the sporting world. But I'm optimistic.

MAURICE EDU: Let me set the stage for you. 2026 World Cup comes to America, México, Canada. It has the impact that we think it's going to have. It's the most exciting tournament that's been staged. Now fast forward one year



later, 2027. How does that impact MLS and even soccer within MLS or within the U.S. and Canada from a more broad perspective?

DON GARBER: Well, MLS isn't what it is without the '94 World Cup. It's still the most popular World Cup in terms of tickets sold. You can imagine what the North American market is going to do to make the World Cup in 2026 the most exciting, biggest, most popular, most integrated in terms of the culture of what matters in these three countries. It's going to be bigger than anybody ever imagined.

The World Cup this past summer was just a precursor to that. We had one of the highest television ratings of any sporting event, and people stopped waiting for it to see whether Argentina -- the Argentinian guy was going to win his first World Cup trophy.

So you can imagine the pathway to '26 is something that's going to be -- I say this a lot, the rocket fuel for the entire soccer ecosystem in the U.S., and I think you said it right, it's not just about Major League Soccer. I mean, there is a movement going on with the sport today. The NWSL is exploding. The minor leagues are creating teams in communities throughout North America. Liga MX is vibrant. Look at what's going on with Canada with their new league. Look at their national team, which, by the way, is driven by Major League Soccer. Six players from Montreal were playing for the Canadian national team.

So all of us are sort of waiting with this enormous energy, this bubbling excitement that is just waiting to almost have that steam tank pop when the World Cup is here.

The key thing for me, it's not a rock concert. We have a three- or four-week -- I have a feeling the World Cup will be a little bigger than perhaps World Cups in the past, but we want it to just that be the kickoff to what the future of soccer in North America is going to be, bigger, more popular leagues, more fans, more interest, more cultural engagement, having soccer be not just something that people know and care about, but having it really, really matter, matter in the halls of power, matter in the halls of sort of the corporate community, matter in the life of everybody who lives in these three countries because I believe in the sport and what it can do to bring people together and bring communities together. The World Cup is managed properly, the opportunity is endless.

MAURICE EDU: That got me super excited and hyper for what's to come, but my final question for you, first of all, this is going to be your 25th season, which is incredibly impressive. As you reflect and get prepared for this weekend kicking off MLS again, what are you most proud

about that's happened under your tenure with this league as you reflect on what 25 years has been like for you?

DON GARBER: You know, I'd better start thinking, this is year 25, and I turned to our PR guys and said, I'm sure at some point I'm going to have to talk about the past. The great thing about running an emerging business is we're still a startup. It's pretty remarkable, we still think like a startup. Every day you wake up and you've got your to-do list, and you don't want to leave anything unchecked as opposed to looking in the past.

I think what sort of inspires me the most -- people used to say to us when is soccer in America going to make it. I haven't been asked that question for years. It's already made it on so many different levels.

Perhaps the thing that excites me the most, we talked about it a little bit outside, is that there are thousands and thousands of people who make a living working in Major League Soccer. It was a couple hundred when I started at most. There are people that have come off the field, much like you, who have devoted your life to being a professional player and now can continue your life in the game, working for a league that you helped build, and have an opportunity to talk to your kids about that.

When I think about our stadiums, the fact that we had only a handful, and we'll open up our beautiful stadium in St. Louis shortly, I think what really gets me emotional is when I look at a big hole in the ground as I toured with Carolyn and seeing water coming into that big hole and now you come in there and people just sort of come in, they buy their ticket, 60,000 deposits beautiful stadium but I know all owners know and all of our staff knows what went into creating these cathedrals for our sport will now be filled with great players who will inspire, motivate and entertain a generation of fans.

Sometimes probably soon I'll be able to look back on that and say that was good work. As my friend Gary used to say, we put in a good ship, to use a sporting expression, so I feel pretty good about that.

MAURICE EDU: Thanks, everybody. Don, always a pleasure seeing you.

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